

Eye Opener

Jewish Braille Institute "Sight" of Inspiration

@Fall Conference

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The power to see is something too easily taken for granted. This is why, upon awakening each morning, we Jews thank G-d for "opening our eyes."

Yet for many Jewish Americans, this blessing takes on a sad and special irony. An estimated 250,000 are visually impaired, many without access to Jewish texts or rituals. Luckily, help exists, right here in New York.

AJL members learned an "eye-opening" lesson about this "overlooked" but growing minority at the Fall Conference, held Wednesday, November 12th, at the Jewish Braille Institute of America. The Jewish Braille Institute (JBI), located in midtown Manhattan, is the first stop for anyone seeking materials for the blind or visually impaired. It services over 6,000 clients in New York City and 30,000 worldwide. The JBI also has affiliates in Israel, Europe, and the former Soviet Union. Its library contains 8,000 titles of Judaica – Bibles, devotional literature, novels, plays, poems, and non-fiction – in Braille and large print. All denominations are represented.

Overview

Opening the conference was Dr. Ellen Isler, Executive Director of the JBI, who described the institute's uniqueness while offering an extensive tour of the facilities. Recently the JBI

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From the (New) President

I feel very fortunate to have been elected to this position. It has always been a great pleasure to serve on NYMA's board and to work with such dedicated and inspired librarians. Thank you, Shaindy [Susan] Kurzmman, now the immediate past president, for two years of excellent programs. You will be a tough act to follow.

There are a couple of changes to report. Edith Lubetski, one of NYMA's founders and longest-serving members of the Board, has decided to step down. Luckily for us, Edith has promised to continue sharing her insights and ideas with us. It isn't possible to acknowledge Edith adequately for all that she has done for NYMA. Steven Bernstein, of Yale University, is now Recording Secretary. He has the honor of having submitted the minutes of a meeting in record-breaking time. And, I am most grateful to those Board members who have agreed to continue in their positions. We welcome new faces eagerly, and I invite anyone who is interested in serving on our Board or working on a particular project to let me know.

Those of you who were able to attend the Fall Conference on a chilly and rainy November morning were treated to a fascinating tour of the Jewish Braille Institute of America. Pearl Lam, Director of Library Services gave us an insider's tour of the various facilities, and Dr. Ellen Isler, Executive Vice President, spoke to us about the JBI's mission and current projects. We would like to thank Pearl Lam and Ellen Isler for their warm and gracious hospitality.

For the remainder of this programming year, NYMA's efforts will be devoted to the 39th Annual AJL Convention, and workshops and conferences will resume in the fall of 2004. I am astounded daily by the energy, hard work and ideas of my fellow Convention Committee members. Working together with the New Jersey and Long Island Chapters, we have already done an enormous amount to assure that this will be an exciting and inspirational Convention. We hope to entice everyone who works in Judaica librarianship to The New York Marriott at the Brooklyn Bridge from June 20-23, 2004.

I look forward to working with many more of you on events and projects which have not yet gotten underway. This should be the start of a great new term.

Elizabeth F. Stabler

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has responded to the immigration of Jews from Argentina. This means adding Spanish to the list of books already made available to the blind in different languages – English, Hebrew, Russian, Hungarian, Romanian, and Yiddish.

Like libraries everywhere, the JBI has to grapple with changing technologies, as analog recordings are going by way of digital, and everything is being preserved in digital format. The recent technological explosion has had an enormously beneficial impact on the blind, who now can not only rely on tapes, CDs, and DVDs, but download from computers.

Cientele includes not only those born (congenitally) blind, but those who have lost or had their sight diminished through diabetes, macular degeneration, accidents, or glaucoma. The elderly and aging baby boomers are especially affected. In addition, many suffer multiple problems, such as Parkinson's, a disease that makes holding a book, let alone reading one, difficult.

Yet, thanks to the value Jews place on literacy, the Jewish visually impaired are among the best educated of the disabled population, and for this reason, no Jew is left behind when it comes to synagogue service, or even a good novel. A wide range of materials – from liturgy to comedy – on virtually all topics related to Jewish interest are available. Probably no other religion or nationality has either provided extensive services or felt such a need.

The changing demographics have affected in other ways the services to the blind. Because fewer children nowadays are born blind, the need for Braille materials has declined: Braille, the series of raised dots for letters, is difficult to learn in later age, when the sense of touch has usually declined. Instead large-print or "talking books" are favored. The JBI has done much to further the Hebrew Braille code at the Central Library of the Blind in Israel. This code, however, has additional problems of its own. Because Israelis read without the *nikudot* (vowels), the system is not an easy exchange. (There is no Braille in Cyrillic.)

Nevertheless, no one Jewish and blind is denied rightful access to either Jewish books or heritage. The JBI has embraced its new role of outreach with a fervor. From Florida, where many Spanish-speakers now resides, to Germany, a haven for Russian immigrants, the JBI realizes that wherever there are Jews, there are readers. The JBI will provide field workers to "feel out" the territory, determine the number of needy patrons, and actually teach them how to use audio books.

Dr. Isler escorted the AJL crew through closed but sunny carrels filled with tapes and Braille Judaica. Because of the number of dots needed, Braille books are significantly larger than regular, even folio, editions. Copies of materials are made, if needed.

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Helping Hand

Same Vision, Additional Service @Jewish Heritage for the Blind

In contrast to the Jewish Braille Institute, the Jewish Heritage for the Blind, located in Borough Park, contains neither library nor recording studio. However, it provides equally valuable services.

The Jewish Heritage for the Blind in fact relies on the JBI for materials and will even refer people there. Like the JBI, the Jewish Heritage for the Blind distributes Jewish works, including its own publications, for all backgrounds and denominations. A Sephardic *machzor*, for example, has been made available, as have Braille Artscroll books for children, and the Orthodox juvenile magazine *Olomeinu*. Again like the JBI, the Jewish Heritage for the Blind provides outreach for this additional population.

"Our greatest need is the large-print books," said the publications manager, who asked to be identified only as Renee G. These benefit not only the blind, but the learning disabled, who make up a significant part of the clientele. Many grateful principals, resource teachers, and parents of children with special needs call in for materials. One of its current projects is the distribution of books in Hebrew Braille to children in Israel, where, given the current economic and political crises, services for the blind and handicapped have been curtailed.

The reasons for this project go beyond the practical. The Jewish Heritage for the Blind strongly believes in equipping the blind and handicapped not only with reading materials, but with spiritual support and inclusion. Simply, the Jewish disabled are considered just as much a part of *klal Yisrael* (the Jewish people) as everyone else. Recently, the Jewish Heritage for the Blind had a *Sefer Torah* completed in honor of the visually handicapped people. A heartwarming *hachnassat Torah* celebration followed, welcoming the Torah Scroll to the congregation.

Indeed, something far beyond the naked eye is revealed. Through the Jewish Heritage for the Blind and other services, a number of Jews can share with their sighted brethren the joys of Jewish literacy.

For information about the Jewish Heritage for the Blind, call (800) 995-1888. Web site: www.jhftb.org.

-H. Cantor

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She held up a copy of Geuesis, the first book of the Torah, which instead of black Hebrew script was a seemingly white matrix of dots. "White fire or white fire," remarked Yale librarian Steven Bernstein.

Live at JBI

AJL members were given a special treat: a chance to drop in on the JBI recording studio, where several recitations were in progress. Within recording booths, guides tested for the right inflections, while actors articulated texts for "talking books" in different languages. A distinguished-looking gentleman delivered before the AJL audience a riveting passage from a murder mystery.

As effortless as it looks, this ability to read well out loud goes beyond having a pleasant or professional voice. According to Lisa Anna Kirsch, studio director, the reader must have a knack for grabbing the listener's attention while keeping out of center stage. (Radio announcers do especially well in this line of work.) Everything, books and magazine articles, are read and recorded – even scholarly works, along with footnotes!

Although the talent pool is comprised mainly of actors and entertainers – the lounge is wallpapered with publicity stills – auditions are frequently scheduled and are available to anyone who would like to try his or her own vocal chords. Several AJL members, in fact, approached Ms. Kirsch afterwards to express interest. Occasionally authors themselves, like Cynthia Ozick or Oliver Sacks, will record their own works. Sadly, although East European language recordings are made available, Yiddish is the most lacking, because of the absence of native actors or readers.

Tapes are transferred onto a special tape machine that is sent to subscribers via by the Library of Congress in Washington. These tapes, as well as all LC tapes in general, are available to JBI subscribers. *JBI Voice*, recorded every month, is a sort of blind Jewish version of *Reader's Digest* that contains selections of articles on Jewish topics, many from prominent Jewish magazines like *Commentary* or *Moment*. In one of the floors below, a Computer Braille machine scopes materials in Optical Braille Recognition. A loyal volunteer staff, some of whom are themselves legally blind, arrange and ship *haggadaot*, *siddurim*, and *bentscher*s to those who would otherwise feel excluded from a Seder or service.

"We also have *machzorim* in Braille and large print," added Pearl Lam, the library director. "They are sent out to Jews who need them." This may also mean Jewish children in public, private, and parochial schools who have special needs. Nowadays, much is available on a Braille computer disc, which has a translator program. This need for a program has grown, as the average age of certified Braille translators is much older.

Added Attractions

Resources extend far beyond the library walls. Cultural events in Manhattan and elsewhere are recorded. The JBI Cultural Series offers the best in Jewish drama, music, and lectures to the blind and visually impaired each month. Brochures and newsletters are filled with JBI services and activities. Much is made available to not only help the blind and visually impaired, but to make them feel welcome. Although no signs proclaim a "drop-in" place – it is in

fact nestled among a row of brownstones – the JBI provides extensive communal service and atmosphere. Staff is friendly, knowledgeable, and dedicated.

Although open to the public, the JBI is restricted in membership. To be eligible, one must be certified visually impaired or physically handicapped by an ophthalmologist or other professional. Membership, however, is free of charge. In spite of its affiliation with the Library of Congress, the JBI receives no funding: its \$3 million yearly budget relies solely on contributions from individuals and foundations.

The conference ended with a brief question-and-answer session by Ms. Lam, who also presented a four-minute video of the Jewish Braille Institute. This video was designed to showcase the JBI to the outside world and to point out its uniqueness. To the "naked eye" – those of us fortunate enough to have our sight – this library would appear in many respects an inspiring novelty. But to those who would be forever lost in darkness without it, the Jewish Braille Institute is a virtual lifeline – and a blessing.

The Jewish Braille Institute of America is located at 110 East 30th Street, New York, NY 10016. Telephone: (212) 889-2525. Web site: www.jbiblibrary.org. ✪

(Comic Books, cont'd from pg. 2)

superheros and devoid of Jewish characters. When I did come across Jewish characters in comics, those comics stood out, in my mind, from all of the rest.

"By the '80s, I began to read such graphic novels as *A Contract with G-d*, *A Life Force* and *Invisible People* – all written and illustrated by Will Eisner, who, last year, was the recipient of the National Foundation of Jewish Culture's Lifetime Achievement Award. In 1986, I read Art Spiegelman's *Maus* and was thrilled when I learned it had won a Pulitzer Prize – the only graphic novel to do so to date.

"Upon becoming involved in the convention planning for the Association of Jewish Libraries in 1996, I saw an opportunity to promote the small number of comic books and graphic novels with Jewish content that I knew of at that time – about 25 items. I posted a message to *Hasafan*, which resulted in replies telling me about Jewish comics stories I hadn't read or even heard about.

"Slowly, I expanded my list and tried to read or purchase Jewish comics that were missing from my collection. As I learned more about how to do research in library school, I began to apply those techniques to finding more Jewish comics. I consulted Michigan State University librarian Randall Scott and visited his library, searched the Grand Comics database, read dozens of Usenet postings and participated in eBay auctions.

"My collection of two dozen Jewish comics items has swelled to over 600 in just seven years. That doesn't include the hundred or so items on my list of wanted comics that are either hard to find or expensive to purchase. Though most comics involve superheros and are published here in the U.S., my personal collection is diverse enough to include non-superhero comics and graphic novels and has items from England, France, Belgium, Germany, Italy, Japan, Israel and Canada.

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